



A Conversation with Marco Bellocchio

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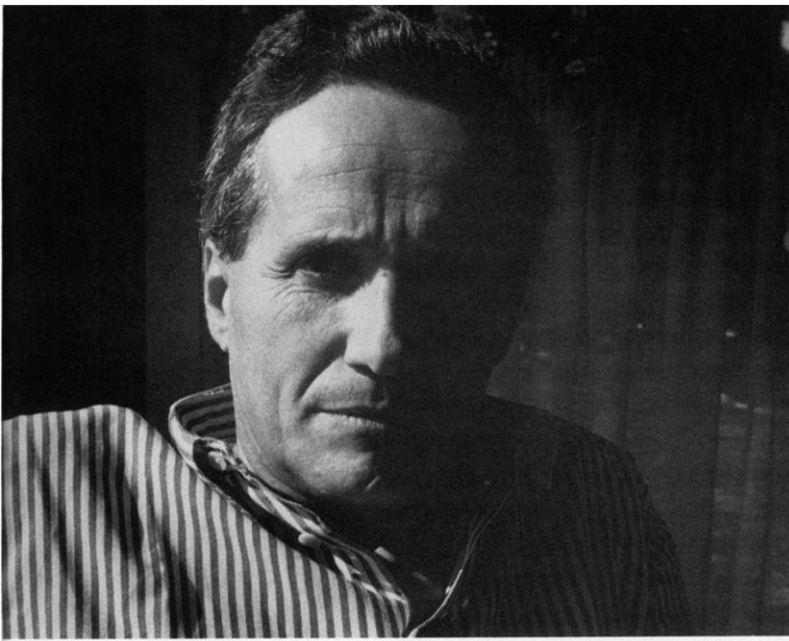
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Peter Brunette

A Conversation with Marco Bellocchio

It is difficult to believe that Marco Bellocchio, *enfant terrible* of Italian cinema, will turn 50 this year. The original impact of his *Fists in the Pocket* and *China Is Near* remains so fresh in the memory, and the films still so powerful on subsequent viewings, that it is easy to forget that they were made almost a quarter century ago. Bellocchio has never been the kind of “comfortable” art-film director, like a Truffaut or a Fellini, say, once so popular with a certain American film-going public, and he has been only intermittently in evidence in the years since his early triumphs. Nor, apparently, is his popularity about to improve. In recent years, in fact, his films, still as confrontational as ever, have become increasingly elliptical in narrative structure, and perhaps even more obsessively personal.

Bellocchio followed up his early successes with another brilliant, challenging film, *In the Name of the Father* (1971), an examination of the typical Bellocchian themes of institutional repression and sexual power in the context of a boy's school. Throughout the 1970s, he was occupied with films that have rarely been seen here. Several of these films were made with political collectives—films such as *Paola* (1969), *Sbatti il mostro in prima pagina* (1972; roughly, “Throw the Monster on Page One”) and *Matti da slegare* (1974; “Crazy People to Set Free”). The last, originally shot in 16mm, argues for the de-institutionalization of the insane. Bellocchio has said that, despite the parody of the Maoist group in *China Is Near*, he made these films with avowedly Marxist-Leninist politi-

cal groups because in the wake of '68 he was looking for a revolutionary perspective that was more scientific and less frivolous than that of the student groups he had been a part of. In any case, he has always insisted that any eventual revolution must be accomplished on two levels at once, the personal as well as the political, and it is the personal, clearly, that has come to dominate his work.

The more commercial but hardly mainstream *Marcia trionfale* (1976) followed these more overtly political films. A disturbing Oedipal drama of infidelity and murder set this time in an army barracks, it explores yet another site of institutional repression. Turning next to Chekhov, Bellocchio filmed *The Seagull* (1977) for Channel One of the RAI, the government television network. He has said that he continues to involve himself intimately with the theater, both in stage productions as well as adaptations, so that he will never be taken as a one-film-per-year kind of director with a certain identifiable personal style that makes him predictable and easy to categorize.

Throughout the eighties, Bellocchio's films have had somewhat more success with an American audience, but that audience has sometimes seemed largely confined to the island of Manhattan, and even there critics have been harsh. He continues to worry the problem of the bourgeois intellectual—unlike his nearly exact contemporary, Bernardo Bertolucci, who seems to have stopped worrying about anything—and the obsessive themes remain. Sexuality, madness, and repressive power—and their multiple permutations, which

vary greatly from film to film—still predominate, but these more recent films have unfortunately lacked the humor that, despite all their gravity and violence, always characterized his early films. *Leap into the Void* (1979), with Michel Piccoli and Anouk Aimée, is a powerful study of sexual conflict and the way the “loving” repression inherent within families often exacerbates madness. Unfortunately, its unconventional manner of signaling approaching flashbacks and other technical novelties baffled American critics accustomed to having these sort of things clearly spelled out. (It lasted a mere three days in Washington, DC before being chased out by hostile reviews). *Leap* was followed by *The Eyes, the Mouth* (1982), a demanding reprise, along more purely emotional lines, perhaps, of the earlier *Fists in the Pocket*; it starred the same actor, Lou Castel, who, at one point in *The Eyes*, takes a woman to see the earlier film. This was followed by an uneven screen adaptation of Pirandello’s *Henry IV*, with Marcello Mastroianni, that Bellocchio himself has admitted was not very successful. Most recently, he has made a commercially successful modern-day adaptation of Radiguet’s notorious novel *Devil in the Flesh* (1986), starring Maruschka Detmers, whose scene of fellatio unfortunately distracted critics from a consideration of Bellocchio’s deeper if hardly new themes of madness, sex, and power.

His latest film, *La Visione del sabba* (1988), is misleadingly entitled *Sabbath* in English, since in Italian *sabba* is a precise reference to a *witches’ sabbath*. In a complex mixing of medieval, irrational past and scientific, rational present, the film recounts a young male psychiatrist’s risky emotional encounter with a young female psychotic who is convinced that she is a witch from an earlier time. Involving himself intimately in his patient’s fantasies, he defies the rules of his profession (explicitly challenging it as yet one more repressive institution), as he gradually comes to realize that a strictly rational approach to madness is, by definition, doomed to failure. At the height of his “vision” of the forbidden, he becomes caught up in the frenzy of a magnificently choreographed (if perhaps overly long) *witches’ dance* inside a burning circle. Dream and reality, past and present, are collapsed in exciting but also inordinately challenging ways, and the demands the film makes upon a audience do not bode well for a commercial release

in this country. In any case, the film seems to mark a turning point for Bellocchio in its unusual reliance on the nonverbal expressiveness of dance and music, and especially on the purely visual—abstract line, form, and color—to make its point.

Our conversation took place (in Italian) in August, 1988, at the Montreal World Film Festival, where Bellocchio’s new film was in competition. The director was friendly and forthcoming, apparently happy to answer even the most inane question, yet also stubbornly insistent upon his own vision of things. His latest film inevitably raises troubling questions regarding his portrayal of the (often naked) witch, played by Beatrice Dalle, whom he obviously wants to endow with certain special “female characteristics” such as an affinity for the irrational and an ability to experience emotion more intensely than men. It’s clear that she also represents for Bellocchio an entrancing, intuitive mystery that remains forever unfathomable to men’s rationality. Such a perspective is hardly new, of course, and like most European directors and screenwriters I have spoken with—both male and female—he does not want women to lose such “natural” differences from men, and is uncomfortable going beyond such bedrock binary oppositions. Hence, a general reluctance to pursue this subject to its logical conclusion is reflected in our conversation. It is also clear, however, that for many years Bellocchio’s obsessive goal has been to move beyond the constraints of rationality and its repressive social effects, and that he recognizes that each so-called female characteristic is, to the extent it is permitted expression, part of the makeup of every man as well.

What does the title of your new film represent?

From the moment the psychiatrist loses his professionalism, his professional coldness, his fantasies open up and he begins to see things he never saw before. He has the “Vision of the Sabbath.” It’s about someone who was a very good psychiatrist, in a normal situation with a family, with kids, and yet, for complicated reasons, he risks losing himself.

Is the film based on historical fact?

In regard to the past as it is shown in the film, it has no relationship with specific historical facts. I

wasn't trying to treat witchcraft itself. The witches' sabbath has very specific rules and ceremonies that I didn't really respect. The historical aspect is simply sketched in. It's really the force of fantasy on her part, and then as the fantasy passes over to him. The moment he enters deeply into a relationship with her, his fantasy becomes richer. But only in regard to his unconscious. For example, somebody told me that they saw the theory of reincarnation in the film, but that's not at all what I was trying to do—though of course everyone can see it however they want. There is a kind of metaphysical side to it, of course.

What attracted you to the subject?

I was very interested in trying to understand the "sorceress" side of the woman—in relation to man, naturally—and by extension, perhaps, of all women. I don't mean this in the bad sense, of

course, otherwise the feminists would kill me! I mean the dimension of seduction, women's relation to men, the mystery that always surrounds women. This is something very dangerous, but it is a side that women must absolutely not lose. I am fascinated by the irrational in women, and that's what the film is about.

What might a feminist say about this "sorceress" side of women?

I think it's very important for women to defend their social victories. It's important that they have their own social autonomy and the social freedom to not become wives or mothers; women must become independent. But along with this, women must not lose the characteristics that belong only to them, not to men. They mustn't lose the "witch-

Sabbath: The force of fantasy.



like'' dimension, something that different women have in different degrees. This must not be lost.

But feminists might object that, once again, everything, even the definition of a woman, is centered on the needs of the man.

Clearly, I'm speaking from a male point of view. But we must respect a certain natural *difference*; after all, men are different, they have penises, and so on. Even their natures are different. I'm not in any way talking about physical superiority, or about violence; actually, it's sometimes more violent not to do something than to do it.

Yet, the psychiatrist's wife is also just one more woman shown pining after her wayward husband, and all that.

Well, I didn't want to caricature the wife in any way. In fact, she's extremely beautiful, but she uses an entire series of different weapons that men sometimes use too. When a relationship is in crisis, there's always a great fear of breaking it off, so she uses all these little schemes and threats, blackmail, and so on; what is used depends on the social status of the couple. But in fact there is something recurring in this, something that keeps repeating itself. It's also true that the wife doesn't have much of a story, because the film is focused on the other two characters. In a certain way, she's predictable, but I don't think it's because she's being represented as ridiculous or as a caricature. She is charming, and can even be considered as more beautiful than the witch, but she lacks something that the witch has, and that's why he falls in love with the witch.

Professional psychiatric circles seem to think that a psychiatrist must never have sexual relations with a patient, yet in your film such relations are presented favorably.

Well, from a professional point of view, this is correct in some ways. A sexual relationship within therapy can be extremely negative and destructive. But at the same time, in order for a patient to improve, it's very important that the analyst must not be on the defensive. Also, this relationship is presented symbolically in the film, in the sense that a psychosis can only be confronted through a complete openness. Otherwise, the therapy fails. The patient's psychosis can't be confronted defensively or with complete professional coldness and technique. Some of the psychiatrists in the film obvi-

ously don't have the enormous internal sense of security that it takes to deal with the girl's violence.

Some of your recent films have been attacked by critics because they are so hard to follow. In this film as well, the relation between the past and present is never all that clear.

That relation is one of the principal themes of the film. I know it may be rather difficult for the public to follow, but I didn't want to do the kind of classic flashback to present the past, or to spell out the dreams that occur at various points during the film. I wanted to bring the past *into* the present, in an absolutely free fashion. Some of the appearances of the witch have no believability, no verisimilitude about them at all. She's in prison, then she shows up at the lake, and so on. In a certain sense, I was trying to destroy, or at least to avoid, a very classical novelistic structure, and instead to follow certain paths that lead to the unconscious rather than to the conscious mind. One of the major themes of the film is the struggle between the rational, that which controls and is male, and the irrational, that which is completely uncontrollable or indefinable, that which cannot be "closed."

Why did you chose Beatrice Dalle for the lead?

In a film, as you know, it's always necessary to mix artistic choices with economic necessities. You have to be able to do this to be a director, otherwise you had better look for another line of work. It was a coproduction with France, so we had to have a mix of French and Italian actors. Since I had seen Beatrice in Beneix's *Betty Blue*, I knew her work and admired it a great deal. It's very difficult for an actress to play a schizophrenic subtly, to avoid playing madness in the American style, you know, completely crazy. So, she read the script, liked it, and for once, the necessities of production coincided nicely with artistic choice.

How much of this film is autobiographical?

There are two sides to the autobiography question. In other words, in this film there aren't any episodes that have something directly to do with my autobiography. I don't see myself in the psychiatrist. In the earlier films, of course, there was a direct link between my work and my own personal biography. But more recently, there is a connection from the point of view of a psychoanalytic investigation, in a sense, that is closely tied up with my

own life, both past and present, and so one can speak of an autobiographical element, perhaps, that is very indirect.

Yes, your ongoing interest in madness and psychoanalysis is evident in this film as well.

What interests me is people in rebellion, against social constraints or whatever. I want to show characters in revolt against a situation that is suffocating them, and this possibility of change through rebellion is what interests me. I'm simply unable to show characters in fixed situations. Sometimes the rebellion fails, but it has to take place so that the character can change. Madness is also a form of rebellion, a cry of freedom. The study of madness is one of the principal themes in my work, going all the way back to *Fists in the Pocket*. One of the reasons this subject keeps returning is that there's never any definitive cure in psychoanalysis, it's always a kind of search, and I'm involved in a group that does this together. It's something general and universal that is very closely tied up with my own work. In my own work, I've always been interested—and it's something that's stronger than I am—in portraying a situation which contrasts strongly with normality, to go against a certain social normality, and thus the subject of madness keeps returning.

There is always the triangle in your films: love and sexuality, madness, and power or the law. In Sabbath the law seems to have disappeared.

This was a very difficult film to make, both from the point of view of form, of style, and from the point of view of the acting, the production, the shooting itself. What resulted was a film that was written one way, but was made in another. There was an aspect of the film that had to do, let's say, with social protest—the psychiatric aspect, for example, in which the young psychiatrist rebels against his teacher, was originally richer and more extended, but when we put the film together, we had to eliminate a lot of this. But the protest against a certain institutional mentality of psychiatry is still very much there. So, the social critique, the rebelliousness that you're referring to, I think, is also represented in this film. Of course, in the final version of the film the two things that come out most strongly are the sexual relationship and the imagination, the fantasy, risk, creativity. But this social element always has to be there as well—in differ-

ent ways in different films, depending on the subject—because otherwise they become too intimate, too internalized. There's an external behavior that has a lot to do with our internal behavior, our social choices, our resistances, which conditions us and has enormous influence on our sexual behavior, for example. There's a direct relationship between them. In this film, it's true that this is not totally clear, but when he refuses to listen to his professor and instead makes love with the girl, this critique was what I had in mind.

I've always seen a connection between you and Pasolini in this regard: sexuality as perhaps the last possibility of rebellion against the forces of normality.

Yes, he also developed an antibourgeois polemic, one that was ferocious and severe! But there's this double contradiction. For Pasolini, homosexuality represented a kind of revolutionary act. For me, however, there's a kind of normality *within* normality. What interests me is the relation between man and woman, in which there are multiple possibilities for protest against society. So it's normal, but it also has to be something different. It's there that I'm looking for something that is beyond normality, beyond repetition, beyond violence. This is the big difference between me and Pasolini.

This is also involved when people ask why I don't look for new and different themes. What I'm trying to do is get as deeply as possible into these themes which are really universal. The relation between man and woman, at all its levels, at the moment of truth, reveals what one is. So there are liberating elements here; they aren't secondary, they're extremely important. People can use these images however they want; but for me, these things will certainly return in my future films.

You said at the screening that your film was typically European. What did you mean by this?

It's a film that demands a public which is sensitized to a *cinéma d'auteur*, a sophisticated public which sees a certain value in film, which is not as concerned with popular success. In the American mentality, let's say, it's not possible to distinguish quality from the public's approval. These things don't always go together, however. In Europe, partly from tradition and partly from history, there's still a way to approach a kind of universality

but which leaves popular approval out. I'm trying to deal with man and his problems in general; it's not as if I take up these problems without realizing that I won't be able to reach everyone. There is also an audience in the United States, naturally, which is more respectful and more attentive to this kind of cinema.

It seems to me that your films of the last ten years are much less plotted, that you are trying to express yourself more on a figural and visual level than through narrative and character.

Yes, that's true. My more recent films are much less novelistic, let's say. Even because of my own cultural background, which is more novelistic—the great influence of the nineteenth-century realist novel—whereas now I'm trying to communicate directly through images. Therefore the visual discourse is becoming much more sophisticated, and more demanding than it was in the past. This obviously creates difficulties within the structures of good, narrative, conventional cinema and it creates difficulties concerning the spectator's involvement. On the other hand, I think that in order to confront—at least for me, from my point of view—certain themes, a novelistic, extremely realistic type of structure is no longer sufficient. This is also true concerning the criticism of society and of institutions, I think. We need to go further inside in order to discover motivations, origins that are deeper than those that can be conveyed through realistic structures.

But isn't it also more difficult to find money to make this kind of film?

This is one of those contradictions in which one continually lives. There's always a game between the producer and the director in which the producer is trying to move the director to an expression that is simpler, and the director is always resisting. It's an arm-wrestling match in which the producer and the director *pretend* to agree, but in reality they usually don't, because one is always trying prevail over the other. And any time you make a film it can become part of a certain journalistic game, a certain curiosity, and so the public can sometimes get interested in seeing even a difficult film. For example, *Devil in the Flesh* was very successful both in Europe in the United States, perhaps for reasons that weren't connected with what the film was

really about, but this at least allows you to make other films. If I'm not mistaken, the film was almost considered pornographic in America.

Yes. Some critics even suggested that you included the fellatio scene, for example, to make the film more commercially successful.

Of course not. This very brief scene has attracted a great deal of attention, completely out of proportion to its part in the film. This is the kind of game that the media play. And sometimes, without meaning to, it can even have a positive outcome at the box-office level.

But even the more traditional love scene earlier in the film seemed very strong to me, intentionally very different from most other films.

You have to remember that cinema is representation. When you see two people making love, it has to seem natural and real. What makes a film pornography, on the other hand, is a kind of mechanical repetition. In these two most recent films, I wanted to show love-making without the usual technique of allusion or symbolization but without making it too naturalistic either. This requires not so much realism but an extraordinary amount of involvement on the part of the actors. I held the shot so long during their love-making in *Devil in the Flesh* because even in that single shot there's a trajectory, a kind of narrative of change to the point that the representation of the act of love justifies the length of the shot and of the scene. It's not a matter of a cold reprise of a sexual act that would have been merely naturalistic and therefore, let's say, pornographic. This story, both on the sound track and in the images, I thought should just be left as it was, because at the same time they were *representing* the act of love. It's a very subtle difference.

The discourse of the fiction, of the representation, is actually very similar, but not equal to, a real relation. In any case, I thought that in the scene of fellatio the representation is what prevailed in that particular scene, even though it was real. It was important to see both of the characters because both of them were in a certain sense losing their virginity. So I was forced to use a technique let's say a little more traditional in the sense that I had to shoot a shot/reverse shot so as not to neglect him in order to see only her. So I would say that even though the scene is prolonged, the style of this par-

ticular scene is very traditional in a way. But even here what I was interested in producing was not a real sexual act, but a representation of change and acceptance.

In *Devil in the Flesh* there was another "complication" in that the representation of the fellatio could only be done realistically, as it were. You see it, you have to see the erection of the penis. But I can say with absolute certainty that what interested me in this scene was not the act itself, but her happiness. She laughs, she jokes, and that's what interested me in this scene, not so much the act itself. If that's all you're looking for, you can just go get a pornographic video tape and see everything a lot more directly. She goes from being depressed to a sense of play, of happiness, and that was my intention.

What do you think now of your earlier films? They still seem enormously powerful and disturbing to me, and my students were quite upset when I showed them Fists in the Pocket recently.

Well, they belong to a personal historical phase that is of course not repeatable. Things have changed a great deal from those days, personal things as well as society and so on. That type of protest is really not possible any longer. And that's not just because I'm twenty years older, but because society itself has changed. The basic thing is not to have that attitude that so many people had then, the attitude of resignation, of acceptance. Sometimes people say that if you deal with madness and things like that, you're just trying to hide from reality. No, this society is a society that I simply don't like, but nowadays any kind of attack against it has to be indirect. It can't be frontal any longer, but requires the discovery of the reasons that that earlier type of revolution failed. For example, in Italy the terrorists, like the Maoists, were applying certain theories which were partly positive, but which didn't take social and psychological reality into account. Consequently, it became a religion, something that came from the outside, in a certain sense, thinking very simplistically for example that things would change if the economic relations changed. That's why capitalism won so easily.

How are your more recent films, say, starting with Leap into the Void, different from your films of 20 years ago like Fists in the Pocket and China

is Near? When, in The Eyes, the Mouth, Lou Castel goes to a theater and sees himself in Fists in the Pocket, what does he see?

That particular scene is about a man who comes back to his town twenty years later, back to the places where he lived the tragedy of a family. It's the past, something that belongs to history, to mythology, to politics. In a certain sense, there's a distance, a separation from the past, as if now the problem is perhaps to go beyond *Fists in the Pocket*, to go beyond a political project which didn't give the results that one had hoped for, the project of changing society. It failed, of course, in the sense that the society didn't change. So the idea—already begun before that—was to say that there was an *internal* reality, inside us, and this is what psychoanalysis is interested in, a reality that we had neglected in those years, in the sense of a certain complexity of drives, a whole internal *world* which was perhaps the only world that could, in a society in which everything was foreseen and controlled, still somehow contain freedom. The potential at least of change, of transformation. So with *The Eyes, the Mouth* in a different way, and already in *Leap into the Void*, there is this *closing* with the past, in order to look for different paths to follow.

How does your adaptation of Pirandello's Henry IV fit into all this?

I would say it was more like a pause, a rest. Pirandello's text has always fascinated me, and the theme itself is very interesting, the question of fiction, madness as a refuge from reality, from mediocrity. But I collided with the literary text, which I underestimated in a certain sense. I realized during the shooting that I should have been freer with respect to the text, which was limiting me, closing me in. I think I was too respectful, too worried, you know, about adapting such a great literary work, so that I was unable to be as unfaithful with it as I should have been in order to make a film out of it.

How do you square your political views with the fact that your new film was financed by Silvio Berlusconi, the great capitalist who owns all the biggest private television channels in Italy?

In Italy nowadays the situation is such that it is no longer possible to make a film with money from the film industry itself. Basically, the only two


real financial sources left are the RAI, which is the television company run by the state, or the private television channels that are owned by Berlusconi. So you either give up working or you go to the RAI or to Berlusconi's channels. So, without being at all cynical, I go where they will let me have the most freedom to do what I want. And both the RAI and Berlusconi's channels have put themselves on the same level and use the same logic—it's all a matter of ratings now, and thus there's little difference between them and certainly no qualitative difference. The main difference is that Berlusconi cuts the films up in order to show commercials, whereas the RAI shows them intact. And this is a serious difference, of course. But the danger from both—especially since they constitute a kind of monopoly—is that they will try to force film-makers to make films that are suitable for theatrical release, but that can also be subsequently shown on television. There's no formal censorship now, but they might start talking about omitting certain scenes because there are family audiences, and thing like that. It hasn't happened yet.

But I haven't had many problems finding financing, for one thing because I work with fairly

small budgets. Also, because the so-called Italian producers no longer have any hope for an Italian market, they're trying to open things up to an international audience. They need a certain number of products that can be marketed abroad. Thus the "auteurs" have the possibility of making films that can at least potentially be shown here, for example, at the Montreal Film Festival. They have an advantage because they are useful to the producers in making a profit. Producers can no longer think solely of Italy, but have to consider making films, at the very least, for a European audience. After 1992, of course, there won't be any economic borders any longer, no more customs [within the European Economic Community], and there is an economic unity that is developing that will be even more radical. So everybody is talking in terms of a European market. And also of course in terms of the great American market—for this is the grand dream of every Italian and, I think, European, producer. They're even starting to make films in English, for example, which, as far as I'm concerned, is a mistake for most directors. There are directors who can do it—fine. But just as there's an Italian style of fashion, there's also an Italian style of film-making, and when people go to see an Italian film, they want to see an Italian film, not something bastardized.

One final question. Have you ever received an offer from Hollywood to make a film?

(Laughter) No. This is the contradiction: Though my films don't cost very much, they still cost enough. Sometimes people have suggested that we "Americanize" a film by asking this or that American actor to join us. For various reasons, this has been impossible. Ideally, I would like to make a completely Italian film, in which my specific national identity remained, because this is what enriches a film. It gives it its most original character. I've often used French actors in my films, but even there the ideal thing would be to make an Italian film with them. It would also depend on the story, on the cost. What I've never been able to do, probably through my own fault, is to assemble a company of actors; I've always had different actors in all my films. Some day, I'd like to work with a group of actors the way Ingmar Bergman does; it's extremely important to have actors whom you know and whose capabilities you know. Instead, I feel rather dispersed right now. We'll see.



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